

# Fertile Crescent: Gender, Art and Society, a program of the Rutgers Institute for Women and Art, supported by Artis

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Various locations, Rutgers University

, New Jersey United States

08/15/12 – 01/15/13

Fertile Crescent Project (<http://fertile-crescent.org/exhibitions.html>)

Institute for Women and Art, Rutgers University (<http://iwa.rutgers.edu/home/>)

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## **ARTIS GRANT RECIPIENT**

### **The Fertile Crescent: Gender, Art and Society (<http://fertile-crescent.org/exhibitions.html>)**

A series of exhibitions and events organized by the Institute of Women and Art at Rutgers University

**Featured Artists:** Negar Ahkami, Shiva Ahmadi, Jananne Al-Ani, Fatima Al Qadiri, Monira Al Qadiri, Reza Farkondeh & Ghada Amer, Zeina Barakeh, Ofri Cnaani, Nezaket Ekici, Diana El Jeiroudi, Parastou Forouhar, Ayana Friedman, Shadi Ghadirian, Mona Hatoum, Hayv Kahraman, Efrat Kedem, Sigalit Landau, Ariane Littman, Shirin Neshat, Ebru Özseçen, Laia Shawa, Shahzia Sikander, Fatimah Tuggar, Nil Yalter

Visit [fertile-crescent.org](http://fertile-crescent.org) (<http://fertile-crescent.org>) for a full list of exhibitions, symposiums and events.

### **A Statement from Judith K. Brodsky and Ferris Olin, the Directors of the Fertile Crescent Project**

When we founded the Rutgers University Institute for Women and Art, we determined that an integral aspect of our mission would be to spotlight women artists from around the globe. Aware of the necessity in the United States for more education on and familiarity with the arts of the countries in the Middle East and the Middle East Diaspora, we decided to inaugurate The Fertile Crescent Project. This has been a long and complicated journey. The work of the artists, filmmakers, writers, composers, and performers who we selected for the project has changed since we began planning in 2007, as has the world itself. Five years ago, 9/11 was one of the defining events of the period. The critical event five years later, may be the Arab Spring revolutions

of 2011.

A word about the title of the exhibition, which is meant to be interpreted as a pun on the essentialist concept of women. Years ago, American schoolteachers would introduce ancient history to their third or fourth graders by referring to the Middle East as “The Fertile Crescent”—the part of the world where agriculture originated. As we began planning, we remembered that phrase and thought it might catch people’s attention and provoke reflection. Our goal is to create an environment in which women are not essentialized, and in which diversity and individuality of cultures are not subsumed under a single umbrella. We anticipated that people would understand that the reference was ironic and that, on seeing the exhibition, they would become aware of its double meaning and colonialist associations when used in conjunction with women from the region active in the cultural sphere.

The University of Chicago archaeologist James Henry Breasted coined the term “The Fertile Crescent.” As Kelly Baum explains in her essay in the catalogue for the Fertile Crescent exhibition, Breasted’s work paralleled the swelling imperialist aspirations of the European countries and the United States to control the Middle East. Yet it was also largely due to Breasted’s *Ancient Records of Egypt*, published in 1906, that the early world of the Middle East and North Africa became familiar in the United States to both scholars and the general public, who, up until then, had thought of Greece and Rome as the primary antecedents to the development of European culture. The popularity of Breasted’s writings resulted in Americans’ widespread recognition of the crucial role played by the people and countries of the Middle East in the development of language, agriculture, law, art, and the other aspects of what we call civilization, despite their simultaneous acceptance of orientalist stereotypes that posited a view of the Middle East subordinate to the West. American museums began to display artifacts of this world as prominently as they did Greek and Roman art; colleges and universities included units on ancient Mesopotamia and other ancient Eastern Mediterranean cultures in their curricula, and, as noted above, even schoolchildren came to know about “The Fertile Crescent.”

Faced with a multitude of artists, writers, performers, and filmmakers from a dozen different countries, a wide range of themes, and a broad scope of creative approaches and perspectives, we realized that we would not be able to include all the inventive beings, nor all of the topics we had encountered. We therefore decided that the project would focus on illustrating the heterogeneity of countries, cultures, and individualities. We realize that our overview may be simplistic, but we hope that it will rouse interest and reflection. We also determined that we did not want to subsume the Middle East and its Diaspora, or the women who would be included in the project, under a single rubric. We came to understand that the Middle East is not a unified culture, any more so than the countries of North America—the United States, Canada, and Mexico. The women from the region have different heritages, different languages, different contemporary situations, but, at the same time, like the North American countries, they also share certain histories and cultural aspects. In fact, if there is any one theme that is present throughout *The Fertile Crescent*, it is the sense of unfixed identities and fluctuating social contexts. The participants present critically insightful explorations into the complexities of the intersections of

gender, contemporary culture, history, and power.

The Institute for Women and Art (IWA) is committed to bringing high quality educational and cultural opportunities to diverse global, national, regional, state, and university audiences. The IWA is dedicated to affording complete access to all and does not discriminate on the basis of disability in employment, programming or accessing IWA resources. IWA makes every effort to accommodate requests for services in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), as required by Section 35.107 of the U.S. Department of Justice regulations, and to coordinate compliance with Sections 504 and 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Upon request and with due notice, the IWA will attempt to make additional accommodations as needed unless the accommodation would impose an undue hardship.